

Is eDemocracy The Democracy, Or an Illusion of Participation?

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Abstract : *This paper discusses eDemocracy within the context of ubiquitous access to the internet via wired and wireless technologies. Such access has the potential to increase engagement in public debate and representation on key issues facing society through an emerging eDemocracy. The paper presents the results of a survey on people's attitudes and involvement in eDemocracy-related activity – such as engagement in public debate, representation of issues, and online protests. The results indicate a high level of self-perception of political awareness among the respondents; however, in sharp contrast, they also indicate a lack of actual involvement and engagement in eDemocratic activity. The paper thus focuses upon whether apathy or disenfranchisement is the dominate variable in the lack of engagement. The paper concludes by suggesting that to increase public engagement, government agencies must be required to respond to electronic representation made by citizens through eDemocratic channels.*

Keywords: eDemocracy, disenfranchisement, direct democracy

1. Introduction

The potential for eDemocracy to reinvigorate political debate and engagement has been much heralded, for instance, Colville argues that "the empowerment of individuals is perhaps the most exciting aspect of the way the internet works" (2008, p. 36). To date, eDemocracy has fallen short of early expectations. Though it is acknowledged that the Internet has exposed more people to a greater variety of political opinions, many remain passive observers, rather than active participants. This research sought to discover the barriers to active participation, the current scope of eDemocracy and how it might be shaped in the future to engage a greater section of society in political processes in the UK.

The primary research findings included a clear indication that political disenfranchisement is a much more widespread problem than political apathy, and that the majority of individuals are passive observers of politics, rather than active participants. In considering eDemocracy as a possible solution to these problems, it was found that current definitions of eDemocracy may leave room for a two-tier system of democracy to develop which could actually lead to a *widening* gap between government and citizen. It is argued that to prevent this from happening, it would be necessary to formalize eDemocratic systems into law, in so doing, taking a step towards the "socialization of democracy" (Held, 1987) and, thus, direct democracy, or, simply, eDemocracy.

The background of this paper briefly introduces the topics of Internet and mobile technologies and democracy. The methodology section details the fieldwork undertaken in the early months of 2010, followed by the presentation of results and key findings. The discussion section draws upon the key

findings before the conclusions are presented. This is followed by suggestions for research to be undertaken in the future.

2. Background

The Internet provides us all with a virtual soap box. No longer does a person need the confidence and conviction to take to Speakers' Corner on a Sunday morning or find their voice at a local residents' meeting. Gone are the days when the privileged few in the world of broadcasting and journalism were the only ones with the power to take their views to the masses. For those with access to the Internet, it is possible to turn on our computers, logon, and take our pick of any number of forums which exist for the sole purpose of individuals exchanging political views and ideas with other individuals, and start typing; and with the apparent anonymity afforded often to us, why hold back?

Furthermore, the advent of the wireless 3G network and the availability of public wifi networks have resulted in an unprecedented empowerment of both individuals and information. Keen and Mackintosh (2001) suggest the move towards mobile technologies provides the opportunity for new freedoms within society: Relationship Freedoms, Process Freedoms and Knowledge Freedoms. From a freedom perspective citizens have the ability to engage in public debate and raise issues wherever they are. They can also provide information on local and context specific issues as they happen. For instance, reporting on the state of local infrastructure (e.g. taking and sending a picture of poor roads) or contribute to real-time debates on key or current issues (e.g. sending texts, or contributing to phone-ins or voting sessions) wherever they are. The move towards 'mobility' is having a significant impact affecting all aspects of society, though particularly engaging for the younger generations (Ling 2004). The situation is likely to continue with the Web 2.0-facilitated move towards more powerful mobile devices, increased wired and wireless bandwidth, more channels for communicating and accessing resources, all resulting in increased ubiquity (Etoh 2005). Mobility and ubiquity provides both the freedoms and capability to participate in eDemocracy.

Democracy is the cornerstone of Western politics, but how do those values translate into eDemocracy? Number 10, Downing Street run an ePetitions website, ostensibly for the purpose of giving citizens a forum to express their views directly to the man in charge, but it has no official mandate in law. So what is the future of eDemocracy? Is it another government service to run parallel with the official running of the country, or should it be taken to a new level which truly empowers the public to have a greater and more direct say in the running of the country? What is eDemocracy, or what should eDemocracy be? Poster (1995) warned against the dangers of shaping the Internet to the paradigms of today, meaning we must imagine the future so the result is a system fit for tomorrow.

The next sections describe a survey on people's attitudes and engagement in eDemocracy activities such as public representation and debate on issues and protests. Then the results are presented along with discussion of implications.

3. Methodology

This is early stage research into eDemocracy carried out in the first four months of 2010. The current stage involves a survey consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data to capture attitudes towards representation, protests and debate on public issues and engagement in eDemocracy activity. The questionnaire included a combination of Likert statements, and questions which gave the opportunity for freeform answers. The control variables of age, sex and occupation were gathered in order to facilitate cross-tabulation. The questionnaire was distributed through a number of online channels, since these were identified as containing likely candidates to participate in eDemocracy activity. These distribution methods yielded a sample of 117, with a fairly even distribution between male (44%) and female (56%) and is close to representing the estimated spread of men and women aged 18 and above in England and Wales which are 49% and 51% respectively (Office for National Statistics, 2008).

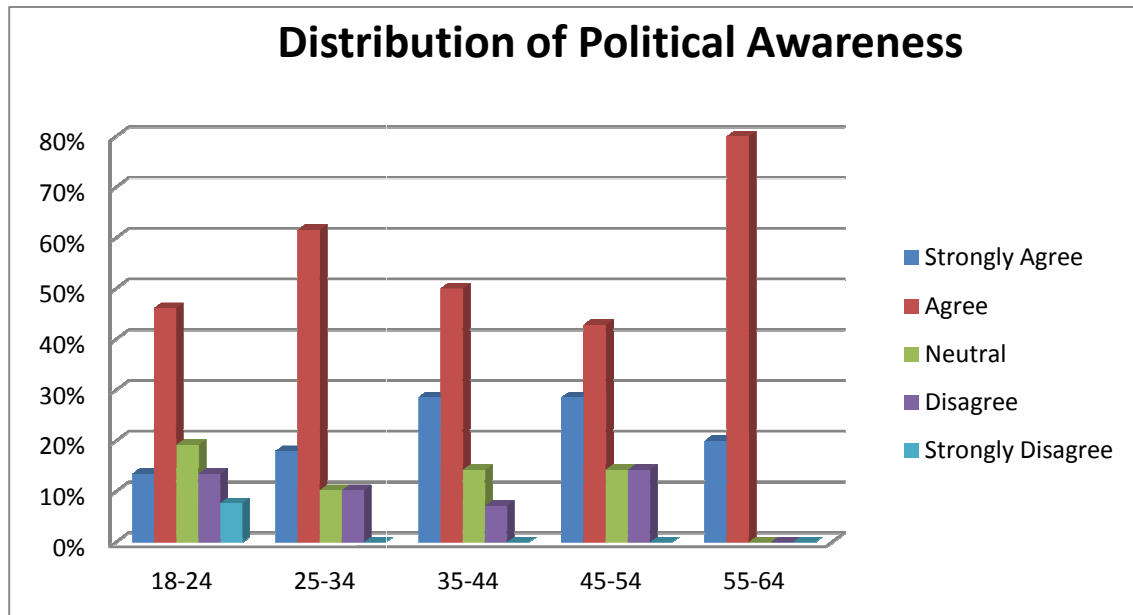


Figure 1: "Statement 4. I consider myself politically aware."

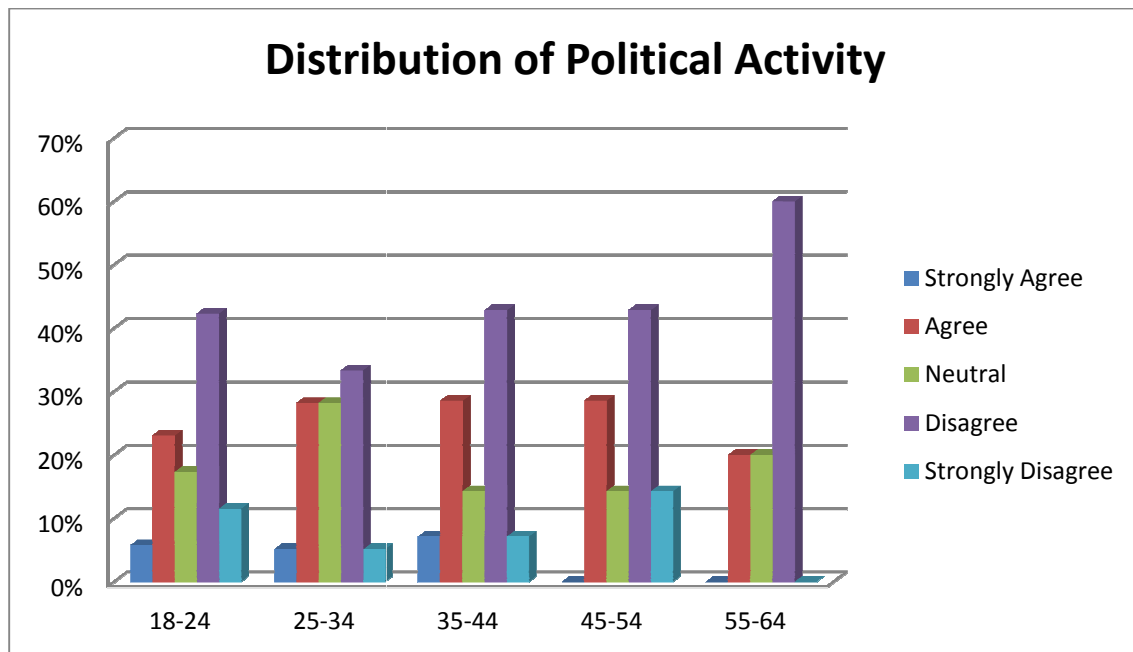


Figure 2: "Statement 5. I am politically active."

The results displayed in Figures 1 and 2 indicate that while the majority of people consider themselves politically aware, this does not translate into political activity. This is particularly pronounced in the 55-64 age group where 100% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they were politically aware, but only 20% agreed that they were politically active.

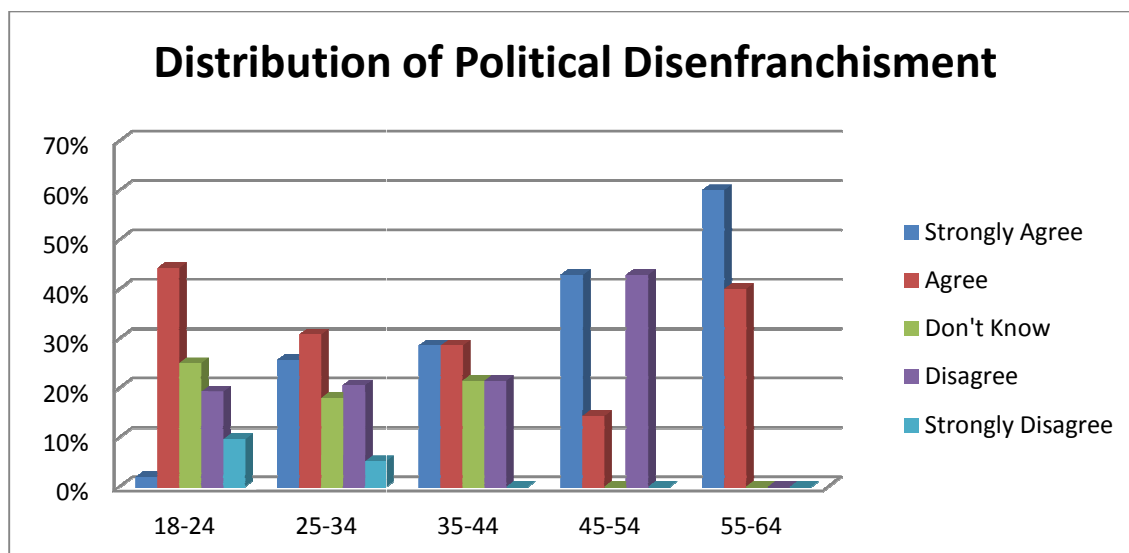


Figure 3: "Statement 21. I am disillusioned with party politics and feel politically disenfranchised."

As shown in figure 3, a total, 54% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt politically disenfranchised, with 20% not knowing and only 27% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Based on these results, it is also notices that the oldest and youngest of the sample appear more likely to feel disenfranchised.

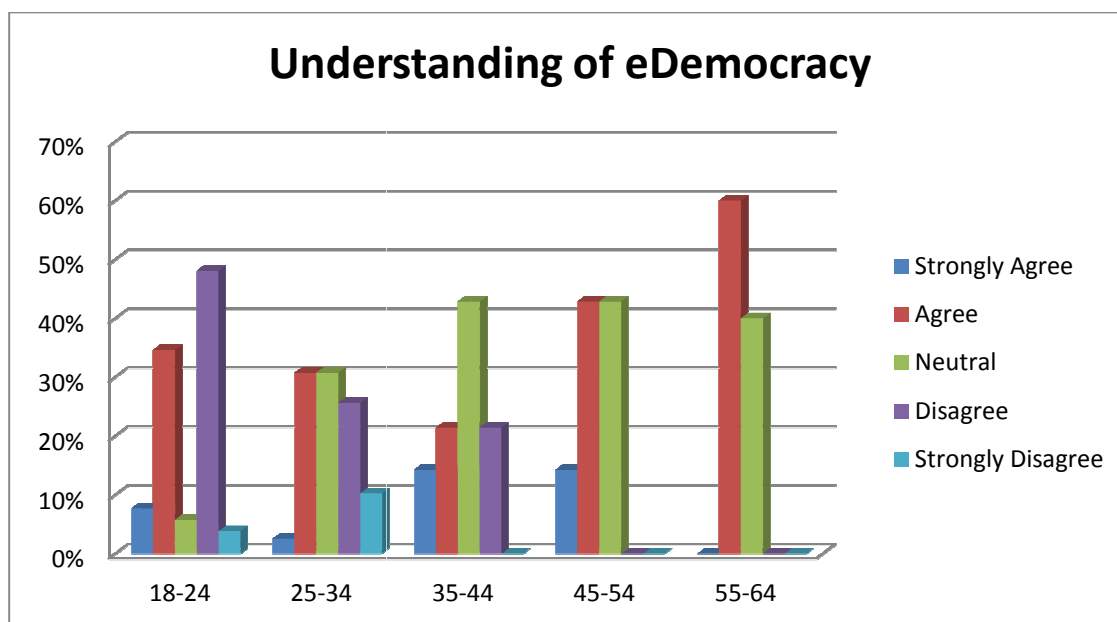


Figure 4: "Statement 12. I have a clear understanding of what is meant by the term 'eDemocracy.'"

The responses presented in Figure 4 indicate that there is a wide disparity across the age ranges in knowledge of eDemocracy. In addition, the total number of people who either agree or strongly disagree that they understand what is meant by the term (37%) is almost evenly offset by the number of people who indicated they strongly disagreed or disagreed (40%); the remaining 22% of respondents opted for the neutral response.

4. Summary of Key Findings

71% of participants consider themselves politically aware, while only 27% *disagreed* with a statement that they felt disenfranchised with politics and the party political system. To consider oneself politically aware, regardless of the truth of the self-assessment, indicates that sufficient interest in

politics exists to make an investment in time to read and watch political material. This is a strong indication that disenfranchisement is a *very* significantly bigger problem than political apathy.

The contrast of 71% considering themselves politically *aware* with only 31% being politically *active* suggests that much of the electorate are *passive observers* of politics, rather than *active participants*.

The majority of respondents claim not to have a clear understanding of what is meant by the term eDemocracy. However, when asked to name websites they might associate with eDemocracy, the majority of respondents were able to associate two or more relevant websites. This suggests, not a lack of exposure to websites which promote or facilitate eDemocratic activities, but a lack of clarity in the definition of what eDemocracy encompasses.

5. Discussion

5.1 What is eDemocracy?

eDemocracy, as defined by Professor Stephen Coleman, and quoted by Parry, in 2002, is "...using new digital technology to enhance the process of democratic relationship between government and governed, representative and represented." (Parry, 2004, p. 2). In 2005, Coleman, writing with Donald Norris, builds on that by asserting that eDemocracy "covers those arrangements by which electronic communications are used by those with power and the citizens they serve to interact with each other..." (Coleman & Norris, 2005, p. 7).

These quotes suggest a current definition of eDemocracy as the means by which to enhance the relationship between government and citizen. eDemocracy has the potential to facilitate a new era of interconnectivity and responsiveness, where, as demonstrated by Number10.gov.uk, governments seek to gain a better understanding of the needs and concerns of their citizens, and, through the use of Internet sites such WriteToThem, and MySociety, many individuals have grasped the opportunity to take their views to those who hold power.

Poster describes the structure of the Internet as 'democratic' (Poster, 1995, p. 81). Though writing in the days when the Internet was only in the early days of widespread adoption and before the days of Web 2.0, Poster makes predictions about the future flow of information that make his ideas relevant today. Electronic media, for Poster, has the ability to underpin a revolution of cultural identity, to develop individuality into a post-modern form, in a process that is still very much in progress: the Internet isn't a tool ready for the people of today, but one which will shape and change us, individually and culturally, over a period of time. Poster hints that a danger lies in failing to recognise this: in trying to shape the Internet to the current paradigm of the modern world, rather than looking upon it as something we must create to deal with the world in our future. This is arguably a most pertinent point for the world of politics: should we be seeking to mould eDemocracy into the current political system, or using it to create a bold new structure for the politics of tomorrow?

The prefix of 'e' to common terms is a phenomenon we have become accustomed to in recent years and signifies the electronic, usually online, delivery of pre-existing services and functions. eCommerce: commerce which is transacted over networks; eMail: letters sent over the Internet, rather than written on paper and sent via courier; eBanking: the provision of banking services and transactions across the Internet that would previously have been carried out in a physical location (Turban, King, Marshall, Lee, & Viehland, 2008). While there has been change in the *way* we shop, communicate and bank, the end result of the activity is not so very different - we have purchased an item or service, used words to communicate our thoughts, and paid a bill. There is purity in the preservation of the end result of our actions, whether the method is traditional or uses digital technologies.

Can the same be said of eDemocracy?

The Oxford English Dictionary (Tulloch (Ed.), 1990) defines 'democracy' as 'a system of government by the whole population [usually] through elected representatives' but Coleman & Norris (2005, p. 7), The Hansard Society (eDemocracy) and Number10.gov.uk (2007) are united in defining eDemocracy as the electronic conduits through which information passes between government and citizen. So it is clear that there is a disparity in the translation of democracy to eDemocracy that clearly does *not* follow the development pattern of many other electronic services.

The research suggests that public perception of eDemocracy is centred around the ePetition (87% of respondents reported associating the ePetition with eDemocracy, while 77% report that they have signed one, while there are strong hints that those in government do not share the public's enthusiasm (Miller, 2008, p. 1).

This points towards a disparity of understanding of eDemocracy between politicians and the general public, or that it is the view of politicians that eDemocracy is something the public gets on with separately, distanced from the real democracy of governing through representation.

The fieldwork indicates that whilst ePetitions are by far the most common activity to be associated with eDemocracy, forums and weblogs are also considered by the public to be tools of eDemocracy. This suggests that eDemocracy is considered to encompass interactivity between citizens. As freedom of speech is an essential feature of any democratic system (Potter, 2000, p. 365) this is unsurprising. Just as democracy has multiple facets, so, too, does eDemocracy. Indeed, it could be argued that this aspect of eDemocracy is the purest, where, rather than the traditional soap box at Speaker's Corner, people are taking to the Internet and broadcasting their ideas and beliefs via the Internet. Furthermore, this is eDemocracy as shaped by the people - blogs and forums can be put to multiple uses, but they have been embraced for political expression.

Any definition of eDemocracy must also encompass the expression and practice of freedom of speech.

Thus, in sum, it is argued that this gives eDemocracy *two* distinct strands of meaning:

Firstly, it is the process of individual citizens exercising their right to free speech by posting their views online, and *exchanging* those views with other individuals, whether in forums, on blogs, in video, or on any of the other platforms which exist to create and share online content in text, speech and image.

Secondly, true eDemocracy must take the democratic processes that currently exist, and *improve* them by capitalising on the Internet's great power for interactive communication to allow a greater degree of self-representation in the system.

5.2 Apathetic or disenfranchised?

In the early days of the Information Age, the Internet was considered by many to be the start of a new world order, which embraced freedom and opened up the door to direct democracy in a manner that was anarchistic in nature (Barber, 2001/2002, p. 2) (van Dijk, 2006, p. 95). That this hasn't happened is largely attributable to the commercialisation of the globalised world, and as the world has commercialised, so, too, has technology. Barber states that 95% of Internet traffic is now commercial, a result of us building the Internet in the image of the world as it already existed. This is reflected in government uptake of eGovernment systems, which, Barber says, "turn citizens into mere consumers of government services."

van Dijk (2006, p. 104) concludes that the "greatest achievement" of eDemocracy is improved access and exchange of information between government and citizen, which has the result of making the citizen more independent, both from the government and the mass media. eDemocracy has fallen short of early expectations in terms of generating interactivity between Internet users: there are many consumers of political material online, but regularly active contributors are scarce.

In explaining this phenomenon, van Dijk asserts, "There is no technological fix for a basic lack of political motivation" (2006, p. 107), but is apathy really the cause of the apparent deficit of political engagement?

While 80% of people consider themselves politically aware, it certainly doesn't mean that they are; but it is reasonable to suggest that they do at least read enough, talk enough, and think enough about politics to have that impression of themselves, which does not point towards political apathy. This suggests that van Dijk's "lack of political motivation" manifests itself not in people failing to take an interest in politics, but, rather, in failing to participate in political activities.

In the course of the fieldwork, when asked whether they felt politically disenfranchised, only 19% responded that they did not, which indicates that disengagement and disillusionment with the political process is a larger issue than voter apathy. People who feel distanced and disengaged from a process are surely less likely to be engaged to participate in it.

Colville (2008, p. 36) holds that "the empowerment of individuals is perhaps the most exciting aspect of the way the internet works." Individuals are using the Internet to group together for the purpose of campaigning for issues on which they share concerns. This is largely unmediated and un-orchestrated by official bodies.

The horizontal structure of the Internet is empowering to individuals, there is a "division of power" (van Dijk, 2006, p. 95) which has the potential to reorganise social structure. The old top down Broadcast Model, characterised by a bottom-heavy structure in which few broadcast to many, has been turned upside down. In the past, it has often only been large companies and those with the capital to fund advertising airtime who have been in a position to participate in the mass media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006, p. 63). The Internet is well able to liberate the flow of information and transform the general public from passive consumers of information to active participants, who create, consume and share information, in a manner that they, themselves, control (Featherstone & Burrows, 1995, p. 83).

The Internet has the potential to give all citizens the tools and opportunity to express themselves, and thus, the ability to represent themselves. Incorporating voters in a system which devolves power from the minority ruling elite and puts it in the hands of the voter, through increased self-representation is both possible in the Internet model, and a potential antidote to disenfranchisement.

The current democratic system was devised in a time where communication was much more difficult. Indeed, before the 20th Century, voting 'took weeks not a single day' (Schama, 2010) simply because of the amount of time it took people to travel to the polls by horse power; following that the results would have to be taken to Westminster. Democracy by any other method than representation in those days would have been a cumbersome, impractical and unproductive system.

Today, however, it would not be necessary even to leave home in order to cast a vote. Communications technologies have progressed beyond recognition and yet, our system of democracy remains as it was designed for a society that existed several hundred years ago – the best state of democracy that could be achieved at the time.

There is a danger that, if eDemocracy is to continue to exist as something which is separate from 'real' democracy, a veiled illusion of improved democracy will descend. ePetitions, though convenient, further reaching and easier to publicise, simply replace the physical petition, and deprive the organisers from the photo opportunity of handing over signatures on the doorstep of Number 10. It is possible that when people feel they are stating their case on the Internet, they will be less likely to engage in protest marches. In short, eDemocracy has the potential to be far less inconvenient to governments than conventional political protest. If there is no requirement for the government to refer to the opinions and beliefs expressed through eDemocracy channels, and a decline in physical protests which cause disruption and attract media attention, there is a risk that a new generation of passive

protesters will emerge, or the result will be a further disenfranchisement of the individual and a widening gap between the governed and those who govern.

If eDemocracy is a system which is to incorporate society as a whole, it is logical that society is involved in its development, with real input from outside government. eDemocracy, if successful, should close the gap between the government and governed, and therefore, it must be supported and trusted by the public.

6. Conclusions

Politics in Britain today does not suffer so much from a lack of interest as it does from the widespread disenfranchisement of the electorate. The current system of government by elected representatives creates a core power base in Westminster which is distant from the individual citizen. The Internet's potential for the empowerment of individuals and its inherently democratic structure makes it the ideal platform on which to build a new system of democracy that re-engages citizens. There is the opportunity for a culture of democracy which creates a sharing of power by incorporating a greater degree of self-representation.

The lack of a secured role in real world politics could even make eDemocracy a danger to democracy. If eDemocracy gives the illusion of participation, while, in actual fact, the opinions given by the population are effectively ignored, it could create an even more independent and self-referencing government which is further removed from the individual citizen.

It could be thus argued that as eDemocracy potentially removes protest from the real world, it also reduces the government's imperative to respond to opposing opinions, leading to further disenfranchisement of the population, and provoking the question of how long this widening gap between the governed and those who govern is sustainable within a democracy.

6.1 Areas for future research

It is acknowledged that this research is in its early stages and a great deal more detailed research is required to expose the full extent of the political apathy/disenfranchisement balance, and more still, to determine the full potential of eDemocracy to redress the problem and what form of eDemocracy is most likely to be effective. It is also apparent that further work on the scope of any system which brings eDemocracy into British law requires extensive and thorough research. It is suggested that this research should begin with the two questions following:

What de-motivates an individual from engaging in political activity online, and remaining in a passive role; and what are the motivating factors among those who are engaged as active participants?

There is a danger that, in failing to give eDemocratic systems their proper place in law, a two-tier system will emerge, effectively giving citizens merely the illusion of participation. To what extent, and how, would an eDemocratic system need to be mandated in law to avoid falling into this trap?

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